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CHAPTER VII

EARLY TRAINING

Nursing and growing up—herdboy gang life and the learning of veld-lore—an institutionalized play-school—'crossing' rites and the significance of ordeals and obscene language—opportunities and satisfactions of old age—the task of the modern school.

We have not yet dealt with all the values and arrangements of Lovedu society to which the individual must be adjusted if he is to become a co-operating member. But it will not be premature to give a short review of the moulding process, as we shall thereby be led to consider some striking institutions of the tribe. The moulding of the individual is a lifelong process; yet some of the main characteristics appear early.

To the Lovedu the aggressiveness of young European children of two or three years old and their inability to play amicably later on with other children, characteristics natural in a competitive, non-co-operative, individualistic society like ours, are a source of surprise and often also amusement. 'European children are not like ours,' they say. 'They like very much to fight.' The Lovedu child is from early infancy treated with great lenience and kindness. 'Care for it,' they say even of an uterine child, 'for to-morrow it will care for you' (*khi lele, ga matso khi lela wena*). There are no struggles for food, no strict rules of feeding. Whenever an infant cries, it is put to the breast. If its mother is away, its grandmother or even the young girl nursing it may put it to their breast to comfort it; but it is strictly forbidden for a suckling mother to allow any but her own child to drink of her milk. A woman who allowed a baby to cry without attending to it and trying to hush it would be severely reprimanded by the older women of the village. A baby is never left alone. Indeed, it is almost an appendix of its mother, at night sleeping against her naked breast, by day being carried on her back in its skin cradle. A woman, it is said, may forget all manner of things, but never the skin cradle of her child. When a mother wants to go out, there is never any problem as to what to do with baby. He is simply strapped to her back to accompany her, and should she choose to dance at a ceremony, even the most violent jumping movements would leave him unperturbed. So accustomed does a Lovedu baby become to his position on his mother's back that, when picked up, he quite naturally stretches out his feet at right angles to his body. While his mother stamps or hoes, the baby will be nursed by his grandmother or a nurse girl a little older than himself. This mode of life and treatment gives the child a sense of security, safety, and warmth. His wants are immediately attended to and the absence of cloth spares him even such small discomforts as wet napkins.

Before the long suckling period is over, the child is already walking and forms part of a group of toddlers, who give him his first lessons in independence. If he falls and hurts himself while playing with them, there is no one to fuss over him; if another child hits him, he will hit back or

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sit down and cry, but, beyond a few sympathetic words from his friends and the injunction to be quiet, nothing is done which may enhance his sense of his own importance. In competition with the growing interests of the toddler, who is able also to partake of the ordinary food of adults, suckling becomes of less and less importance, indulged in only at night or when he feels in need of being fondled. His companions, too, many of them a little older than himself, begin to tell him there are worms in his mother's breast and perhaps even tease him a little. If there is no younger brother or sister, a child may continue drinking at his mother's breast until about four or five years of age and it is not at all an unusual sight to see a boy of five stealing a drink at his mother's breast before running off in the morning to herd goats with the others. Most children leave off drinking quite naturally; sometimes, however, the mother puts some chili on her breast or a bitter herb to deter the child. It is said that boys generally like to drink from the breast much longer than do girls, and certainly it was little boys from three to seven years of age, not little girls, who used to nestle up to and stealthily fondle one of us.

There is no necessary connexion between weaning and the resumption of sexual intercourse by the parents, which may take place at any time after teething and depends largely upon the number of wives there are. It is, however, believed that normal sex relations should not be resumed till after weaning. If they are resumed before the child is able to walk, the old women who control such relations between husband and wife will warn the parents to be careful: 'For who will carry both children?' Sex intercourse on the part of its mother is believed to harm the suckling child. That is why, when husband and wife resume such relations, some of the semen of the husband must be smeared all over the child 'that it may know its father' and not take ill. Often the semen is mixed with powdered medicine as well as with the vaginal secretions of its mother. A suckling woman is seldom accused of adultery; it is thought that she would not wilfully do a thing that is harmful to her child. Christians resume intercourse after the child is a few months old; such external intercourse is said by them to 'make the child grow'. The sending of children to the mother's mother for a few years is likewise not definitely associated with the weaning, though naturally it cannot take place before.

Grown-ups try to teach children to greet (*lɔsha*) at an early age or they clap their hands to make the toddlers dance, however unsteadily. When a child is able to go on an errand to the next courtyard, this is considered a great advance. It is then said, 'The child is able to hear.' Bodily control is not expected of small children; but by the time a child is about three years old its mother will take it outside the village near the ash heap and smack it if it messes in the hut or courtyard. At five or six a child will go out into the bush.

There are few restrictions in the life of a small child: no elders run after him with injunctions not to touch this or that; if he chooses to roll in the ash heap, he may do so without getting into any greater trouble than a mild rebuke from his mother, who will tell him she objects to suckling so dirty a boy. One may see a child playing with a sharp knife without a word of admonition from his parents. There are no regular hours. A